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OUR VIEW: EPA proposal worth a look

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It is safe to reason that without the reinstitution of a federal tax on manufacturers that produce chemical waste, the federal Environmental Protection Agency will be without a source of tens of billions of dollars that could be used to speed up the cleanup of Superfund sites like New Bedford Harbor.

And reinsituting such a tax appears unlikely given the ongoing economic troubles in the United States, as well as the more than \$1 trillion annual federal deficit that properly requires Congress and the White House to curtail spending every way that they can.

What that means, though, is the harbor will take decades to clean after decades of contamination from manufacturers. The dredging of the upper harbor got a boost last year with the release of extra federal money, but it is unlikely that the federal government will continue to send hundreds of millions in extra cleanup dollars this way.

The soil being removed from the harbor is shipped away for disposal, but the process is lengthy and expensive, which is why it will take decades to complete.

So the EPA proposal to bury soil containing PCBs dredged from the inner harbor below the Coggeshall Street bridge and contain it beneath a layer of clean sand is worth close examination. Whether the trade-off is safe or desirable is still unclear.

Most importantly, it must be determined that once the contaminated soil is buried, there is virtually no chance that a storm, earthquake or other man-made or natural event will rupture the sand cap on the burial site and release PCBs back into the harbor.

That is a question that engineers will have to answer to the satisfaction of local environmentalists, elected leaders, businesses and taxpayers before it can proceed.

The EPA has established a 30-day comment period on the proposal, and it will be closely studied to see whether it can work. If it does, then the inner harbor could be cleaned in four years, which would coincide with the expected redevelopment along the harbor.

However, if the plan poses unacceptable risks, the region should oppose it and continue asking that the contaminated soil be shipped off for proper disposal.